

## THE EXISTENCE OF FEMININE MASCULINITY IN A CLASSIC EPIC FANTASY OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE SILMARILLION* AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Among the worldwide best-selling fantasy novelists, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien stands as the most best selling fantasy novelists in twentieth century literature. His major works are The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion. This paper primarily focuses on the femininity as masculinity in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings. Many critics have been criticized for lacking of female characters and the existence of the stereotypical natures. This paper discusses the females possesses masculinity in their deeds. Such female characters are projected very independent, strong, and important to the central plots of each novel. Tolkien's such characters are Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Eowyn, and Shelob. They stand as staunch examples for their strength. These characters are invited from old Germanic, Norse mythology, and Catholicism. It has given a new shape to demonstrate qualities of spiritual and physical power, self-determination, and their personal sacrifices. In Tolkien's world, it is clear that power goes hand in hand with sacrifice and those who sacrifice the most tend to be the strongest. Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn are all potent individuals and they sacrifices for the good of Middle-earth. Tolkien emphasizes the importance of healing and fertility throughout his works and made it clear that femininity is not the only characteristics of a woman bears, but also they share a range of masculine traits as well. Feminine traits are also attributed to some of the most heroic men of Middle-earth, and Tolkien makes it clear that only by embracing both 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities can one be a truly strong individual.*

**KEYWORDS:** J. R. R. Tolkien, Fantasy, Femininity, Masculinity, Germanic, Norse Mythology, Catholicism, Middle-Earth, Fertility & Individual

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### INTRODUCTION

In this universal everyone believes that men are the 'stronger sex', and masculine behavior produces a strong temperament. In the same manner, women describe as beautiful, gracious, gentle, generous, valiant, sacrifice and other typically feminine traits. The widespread characteristic of women is enchanting the beauty. In Tolkien works the powerful women characters are Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn. They are all described at some point as being fair women, as well as holding some enchanting power over those who are in the presence of their beauty. This powerful peculiarity is not exclusively attributed to the women in Tolkien's works. The critics feel that "the women of Middle-earth are too feminine" (Ringel, 165). Some critics are exclusively described with

feminine traits, while others share a blend of masculine and feminine characteristics. In that, Galadriel, Eowyn, Arwen, and Shelob are all, at some point presented with traditionally masculine characteristics in Tolkien works.

### **The Existence of Feminine Masculinity in *the Silmarillion***

There are no other women in *The Lord of the Rings* who take up a shield and sword and do battle. Luthien is some sort of wrench warrior. She never uses physical strength to fight her adversaries, but instead of that, she uses magic. Luthien is not a sheer Elf, but the daughter of Melian as in text “a Maia, which makes her a very powerful Elf” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 22). Her skills are radiating a magic cloak before the eyes of her enemies and to make them fall asleep, and the magic of her voice, which is her most authoritative resource. The power of song and music is evident right the way through in *The Silmarillion*. It is also accredited that Tolkien borrowed the idea of singing as a powerful art from the ‘Kalevala’. It is Finnish epic poetry which is compiled by Elias Lonnrot. In *The Silmarillion*, King Finrod Felagund (a Noldorin Elf) sings in the contest with Sauron. Singing is alleged as a great power to the people and creatures of Middle-earth. It is more powerful than a sword. Luthien also sings in order to devastate the fortress of Sauron, and hoard Beren.

Luthien saves Beren from hazard a few times. Beren is sent to repossess a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown, but she is captured. After Sauron incarcerates Beren and his companion Finrod, Luthien and Huan, a hound, come to their rescue; “Luthien casts her cloak over Sauron’s eyes, and Sauron yields to the power of Luthien. She is then able to retrieve Beren from his prison.” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 206) West affirms that Luthien “does far more to achieve the quest of the Silmaril than does Beren, even urging him on when he is ready to abandon it rather than put her at risk” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 265). Luthien is a gentleman and wanting to spare from harm. Beren is a mere human, and although brave, he is mortal and is easily overwhelmed by Sauron and Morgoth. There is no way that Beren could have accomplished any of his quests without Luthien’s help. This is a very potent example of the strength that Tolkien attributes to his female characters. After saving Beren several times, Luthien is ultimately able to be in love with her, and through their love; they give birth to the future of Middle-earth.

### **The Existence of Feminine Masculinity in *The Lord of the Rings***

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has been criticized for his lack of major female characters, as well as the conventional nature of those females present. This paper discusses the female characters present in Tolkien’s works; actually he presents female character as very independent, strong, and important to the central plots of each novel. Tolkien’s characters Galadriel and Arwen are good examples of strong females. It is important to keep in mind the background from which Tolkien drew his characters, such as old Germanic and Norse mythology and Catholicism. If one takes into account these ancient ideas, as well as Tolkien’s personal background, his women actually demonstrate qualities of spiritual and physical power, self-determination, and wisdom. Here the paper deals with the new image of women in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The idea of power in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is not only about physical strength, and the capability to rule over others, although there is plenty of that in the story. Power is also portrayed in a much deeper and the power and the ability to sacrifice oneself for the greater good. It is this latter type of power which Tolkien found superior. Beauty and grace can be considered a powerful thing. Some critics feel that focusing on a woman’s beauty and graciousness takes away from other stronger qualities she might possess, sometimes submitting her to pious veneration. The feminist Partridge bestows great meaning to alleged sexual innuendo concerning females in Tolkien’s works, and use these analyses to

condemn Tolkien as a misogynist. The special focus on Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Eowyn and Shelob, five of the most significant female characters in Tolkien's works, this paper will reveal how Tolkien made his female characters stronger, wiser, more powerful, and more significant to the central plot of the story.

Tolkien's wizards of Middle-earth tend to be very wise, as well as the Elves, and there is no Elf in *The Lord of the Rings* wiser than Galadriel. Galadriel forms as the idea of creating council to discuss the providence of the One Ring. The acumen of Galadriel is very much equal to that of Gandalf and Elrond, which makes her a very strong character. Galadriel even comes off as being more upbeat than Elrond, as she vigorously defends Lothlorien against Orcs, and Sauron himself. The vivid description about Galadriel's radiant eyes and hair is as "serve to emphasize the brilliance inherent to Galadriel's character as reflective of her enhanced physical and moral state" (Tolkien, Letters 231). Such physical descriptions are typical for Valkyrie figures, and many of Galadriel's descriptions reflect such an image, which help to elucidate wise and powerful. Galadriel is not merely wise, but she has prophetic talents. She can look into the minds of those she meets, and can sometimes see into the future via her Mirror.

Another wise figure in the novel is Arwen, although she does not come into view as often as one might like. She is very instinctive of Tolkien's creation. She freely offers Frodo her jeweled necklace to reassure and mend him and her passage, she tells as "west if he still feels uneasy, it is time to sail" (Tolkien, Return 304). The wisdom that Galadriel and Arwen display comes from their innate ability for independent thought. Shelob is one of the most over-analyzed characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a giant spider. Both Shelob and her lair have been criticized for embodying some evil, sexual undertones. Partridge discusses Shelob's lair and its apparent similarity to the female sexual organs. According to him, Shelob's cave symbolizes the womb; the cobwebs are the pubic hairs. Frodo's infiltration of Shelob's cave is obviously getting the wrong impression about as some sort of intercourse, and Frodo's sword the symbolism of his derisory manhood.

Tolkien's women are very self-governing and exert their sovereignty in spite of those who would dominate them. Arwen's tale is similar to Luthien's. Her father, Elrond, wishes to her endeavor to the West along with her kin, but she will not leave Aragorn. Her decisions are stayed enormously important to the future of Middle-earth. Eowyn is quite autonomous, despite the will of others to talk down to her and tell her what to do. Not only is she a woman, but she is fairly young. Theoden loves her, of course, but his attempts to protect her also hold her down. Theoden does choose Eowyn to lead the people in his stead while the men are at war, but he makes it clear that he feels her place is not in battle. Eowyn disguises herself as Dernhelm, a male warrior, in order to fight, but since it is most likely that she disguises herself in order to put out of sight her personal personality from Theoden. "All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour... I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death" (Tolkien, Return 1155). These are powerful words, and Tolkien made it clear that women do not have to do as men power them. Eventually, Eowyn rides out to battle anyway and becomes an honorable hero. Galadriel is quite self-determining, although she and Celeborn are partners. No one speaks down to Galadriel, as she is one of the most powerful characters in *The Lord of the Rings* of either gender. Not only is she older and wiser than most who come across her, but she also has great magic. With independence, however, some difficult decisions, and sometimes these strong women are forced to choose between ultimate power and meekness.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Galadriel and Celeborn are first introduced in as "equally tall, grave, and beautiful" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 415). They have equally ascribed two conventionally masculine qualities (tall and momentous), as

well as a customarily feminine trait as too gorgeous. Celeborn and Galadriel are described as keen, profound, and accrediting wisdom. Madill explains that such descriptions about them: "...suggest that both the male and female characters are equal in status and that they both admirably share masculine and feminine qualities" (Madill, Gendered 4). In *The Fellowship of the Ring* Galadriel is further described as having a voice deeper than most women (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 406), as well as being wise and fearless (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 480). When Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel she momentarily transforms into a "terrible and worshipful... tall beyond measurement" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 486). Her power renowned in the midst of the Men of Middle-earth and Aragorn must explain to the fellowship that "although she may be powerful, she is not evil" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 370). Samwise describes Galadriel as "strong in herself and explains how anyone who thinks her a threat will find themselves threatened, although he knows she is not dangerous" (Tolkien, *Towers* 657). Galadriel may be beautiful, but these descriptions portray a powerful and wise being beyond any mortal man.

Eowyn is similarly given some masculine descriptions. She is often described as fair, and her hair is a tribute to its golden beauty. She speaks very and said to be as "strong, and stern as steel" (Tolkien, *Towers* 740). King Theoden describes Eowyn as "fearless and high-hearted" (Tolkien, *Towers* 751). The King suggests that she should lead the people while the King is away from the country. Throughout *The Return of the King*, there are many descriptions of Eowyn that can be interpreted as generally masculine terms, such as stern, proud, hard, courageous, valiant, and high (as in regal). These are not the descriptions of a stereotypical woman, but of a woman who has won renown amongst her kin, and respect from the men around her. These qualities are Faramir falls in love with her, not to her external beauty. Arwen, Galadriel, and Eowyn are quality of graveness. Arwen bears many masculine qualities and she and Luthien are the beauties of Middle-earth. Shelob is beautiful as Tolkien mention in his work, "Shelob is dark and evil, but great" (Tolkien, *Towers* 815). Shelob is also thicker and stronger than a dragon. She too is fearless as Eowyn, although in a different way, as she in confederacy with Sauron.

Femininity and masculinity are not always so cut and dry. Many of the characters in Tolkien's works have a mixture of traditional feminine and masculine characteristics. Madill mentions as "if it is even possible for one character to embody only masculine or only feminine qualities, or whether they do not almost always intertwine in some way" (Madill, 6). Tolkien does not only accredit feminine qualities to his women, but also to his men like Celeborn, Faramir, Finrod, etc. They have some qualities which could be interpreted as feminine. In that, we should think less of them as strong male figures. In fact, Tolkien believed that he mentioned in his letters as, "If any of his characters resembled him it was Faramir, with the exception of lacking Faramir's courage" (Tolkien, Letters 232). Tolkien associated himself with the characters and bearing qualities as he mentioned, "some may think traditionally feminine, such as gracious and gentle" (Tolkien, *Return* 1091). But being gentle in some situations does not mean one cannot be strong in others, as Tolkien illustrated through some of his female characters. Tolkien's inspiration came from a wide range of old mythology, including the epic poem *Beowulf*. Although it may not be fair to continue to place women in passive roles in literature, it cannot be denied that history has unfairly placed women into these roles for many years.

Women in western society have newly begun to serve up as soldiers in war. Women in the early 1900s in Britain were homemakers, worked as clothing manufacturers or secretaries, and during World War One they worked mainly as nurses. British women were not permitted to serve in combat alongside men until 1990. During the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) were women in the British military did not participate in the battle and yet Tolkien has a human

woman participating in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. The fact that Eowyn is often described as “wearing armor and a carrying a sword in Tolkien’s text shows how important her martial aptitude is to her character” (Donovan, 121). Eowyn is a woman born of kings. She is small and fair, but gutsy and strapping. She wields a sword is one of the most important figures in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Eowyn is the only one in the battle capable of killing the Witch-king of Angmar. The study argues that Eowyn’s participation is one of the most glorious battles of Middle-earth. It is a large step forward in the literary history of women in war. Neville feels that “Tolkien has been radically modern in depicting a woman who dares to do what would have been unthinkable in the culture upon which he based the Rohirrim” (Neville, 102). Hypothetically, Eowyn is paving the way for other women of Middle-earth to become soldiers and heroic figures themselves, and to show their quality. Tolkien is somewhat in advance of his time in western feminist thinking.

In *The Two Towers*, where Faramir is tackling to Samwise and Frodo, Tolkien uses Faramir’s voice in order to punctuate his own love and respect for those who enjoy nature; “your land must be a realm of peace and content, and there must gardeners be in high honour” (Tolkien, *Towers* 759). Eowyn becomes a gardener after the war of the Ring. Eowyn becomes a gardener after the war. Samwise settles down and does some rather dazzling gardening with the seeds Galadriel gave him. Fertility is something that Tolkien found immensely important, and integrated it into his work. He renders the importance of fertility to Middle-earth through Galadriel and her preservation of Lothlorien and the relationships formed between his male and female characters.

There are several nuptials that take place at the end of *The Return of the King* (*The Lord of the Rings*) for instance, those of Aragorn and Arwen, Samwise and Rosie, and Eowyn and Faramir. These matches are important to the prolongation of men, hobbits, and a few Half-elves in Middle-earth. Donovan explains that “in heroic German poetry, some Valkyrie women... form compelling relationships with male heroes that alter the course of events in the human world.” (Donovan, 111) This punctuates the importance of marriage and fertility that comes with pairing off. In this same respect, the seeds that Galadriel gives to Sam are important to the continuation of nature after much of it has been destroyed by the war. Fertility plays a major role in the rebuilding of all things. It has been lost during the war of the Ring. Women, of course, are essential to continuing life on Earth, and having strong women rear can only help Middle-earth. Luthien, for instance, bears a child (Dior) who is the beginning of a long line of strong Men and Elves. Arwen and Aragorn’s children will most likely be both wise and vigorous. Knowing Eowyn’s past, her children will almost certainly be brave and independent. Both male and female (human or otherwise) are vital to productiveness and the continuation of life in Tolkien’s Middle-earth. In his world, it is clear that power goes hand in hand with forfeit and those who sacrifice the most tend to be the strongest. Tolkien emphasizes the importance of healing and fertility throughout his works. It clears that femininity is not the only characteristic women bear, but also they share a range of masculine traits as well. Feminine traits are also attributed to some of the most heroic men of Middle-earth.

Some critics claim that the pure lack of female characters in Tolkien’s works made him a sexist or a misogynist. Galadriel and Arwen are the two main elvish women, and Eowyn is the only human heroine in the story. There are also several other female characters including Shelob, Goldberry, Rosie, Lobelia, and the Ent wives. If one’s focus is on *The Lord of the Rings* alone, it is true that there are not as many female characters as men, but the fact that the women are the minority helps draw consideration to each woman’s exclusivity and importance. Others feel that Tolkien was not as harsh on the women of Middle-earth as the British school systems were on women during the 1970s. This contrast, however, does not help to improve the view future readers may have of Tolkien and his female characters. It is necessary to review

his personal background, as well as his academic background in order to understand where his female characters came from. Only then can we make assumptions about their strengths and weaknesses.

During Tolkien's college years he associated mainly with men because many women attended university at that time. There was a strong sense of male camaraderie as a result of the all-male schools (Partridge, 179), and further established because of the all-male British Army in which Tolkien served some time during World War One. Another source of Tolkien's strong sense of male camaraderie came from his participation in the literary discussion group called the *Inklings*. Some of the members of the *Inklings* have been criticized for their 'blatant' sexual discrimination towards women, including C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien (Partridge 180). Lewis and Tolkien were good friends for some time, but after Lewis developed a close relationship with Charles Williams, another member of the *Inklings*, Tolkien and Lewis had a falling out. Lewis was particularly criticized for some of his remarks on women (Partridge, 180), often resenting them for their general interference in intellectual discussion and friendship between men. It was not uncommon for men to think of women as intellectually inferior at this time since many women lacked extensive education. Tolkien agreed that it did not seem that women could go as far as men intellectually, but that did not discourage him from treating his female students equally to their male counterparts and aiding them in their education (Carpenter, 169). Edith was not an intellectual, and their marriage was far from perfect, but it is clear they had a deep love and respect for one another like Tolkien, the liaison with his wife Edith was a loving one.

Tolkien attributes a great amount of strength to the women of Middle-earth. Many of Tolkien's female characters are derived from the strong women of Old Norse and Germanic literature, which helped shape his own opinion of women. Tolkien also had a great amount of respect for his wife who was a muse for much of his work. West states that "Tolkien is far from being a feminist author, [but] his women characters are stronger than they are often made out to be" (West, 259). Tolkien's suspected beliefs about a woman's intellect; he presented Galadriel and Arwen with mammoth amount of wisdom and intelligence. These are not the only strong qualities that Tolkien attributed to his women. He gives Eowyn a incredible amount of physical strength for someone so slender and small, as well as extending qualities of courage, sacrifice, and power to his female characters. As Donovan explains; "Tolkien's Galadriel, Shelob, Eowyn, and Arwen are characters whose words and actions in *The Lord of the Rings* provide a ... polyphony of motives that shift the plot's course of events as well as the reader's expectations of an appropriate outcome" (110). Bravery and brawn are strong traits, but they are merely strong in the traditional sense. Tolkien tended to have other opinions of what could be painstaking strength.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is significant to keep an open mind in our contemporary way of thinking. Tolkien spent much time with other men who had unsavory views of women, as was common at that time. However, that did not stop him from creating some authentically, strong female characters in his works. It may be argued that the small number of major female characters in his work actually aided in their uniqueness. The women and men in Middle-earth share more than just the world in which they live together. Both men and women sexes show courage, strength, and wisdom in the face of adversity, as well as sharing a deep love and respect for each other. They share feminine and masculine qualities which strengthen them as individuals. Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn signify all that is good in the world, as well as being leaders within their communities, and preserving the traditions and culture of their people. Tolkien's major female characters display some strong qualities. What Tolkien shows us by way of his work is that only through the joined strength of men and women are we able to overcome the many obstacles we face in life.

When reading *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* is important to keep an open mind, and not to get lost in our modern way of thinking. It is easy enough to ask why certain people from the past did not do things differently, or behave more wisely. Tolkien spent much time with other men who had unsavoury views of women, as was common for that time. However, that did not stop him from creating some genuinely strong female characters in his works. It may be argued that the small number of major female characters in his work actually aided in their uniqueness. If there had been just as many main female characters as there were male characters in Tolkien's works, the individuality and distinctiveness of those women that were present may not have been as powerful. Yes, there are stereotypes in between, but these stereotypes apply to both the male and female characters. The women and men of Middle-earth share more than just the world in which they live together. They share a passion for healing and gardening, which Tolkien found a vital quality to have. Both sexes show courage, strength, and wisdom in the face of adversity, as well as sharing a deep love and respect for each other and Arda. They also share feminine and masculine qualities which strengthen them as individuals. Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen and Eowyn symbolize all that is good in the world, as well as being leaders within their communities, and conserving the traditions and culture of their people.

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